

Early art work as a source of botanical information in South Australia

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The landscape painters, G. F. Angas, S. T. Gill and E. von Guérard, all worked in South Australia soon after establishment of the colony. The potential contribution of their early paintings and drawings to the record of original vegetation has been evaluated by comparing current landscapes with their published works, field sketches and originals housed in the Art Gallery of South Australia, the von Guérard sketchbook from the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, and field sketches by Angas held in the National Library of Australia.

Samuel Thomas Gill

Born in 1818, Gill settled with his parents in South Australia in 1839, only three years after settlement of the colony. He was then 21 and had some training in art. In 1840 he advertised, soliciting patronage and offering a correct likeness of patrons, families, horses, dogs and local scenery. For 12 years he worked in South Australia, visiting and drawing many of the sites later used by Angas and von Guérard. He travelled extensively in the state and was a member of the Horrocks Expedition of 1846 which reached the lower Flinders Ranges. About 1851 he was insolvent and left for the Victorian goldfields where his most famous work was done (Appelyard *et al.* 1986).

A botanical controversy has existed over the original vegetation of the Burra hills. Gill did a series of paintings of the site from the opening of the mines in 1845. Three crucial paintings are *Burra Burra Mine 1845*, *Koorunga, the Burra Burra township 1847*, and *Patent Copper Company's smelting works and the Burra Burra Mine 1850*.

His pictures show a rapid and dramatic clearing of the original open woodland for the copper mines, housing and fuel. In a remarkably short space of time the hills are shown as bare as they are now.

George French Angas

Angas was born in 1822. After a brief period in the family business and an equally brief four months of art lessons he visited Malta and Sicily. His published rambles were illustrated with his sketches and lithographs. His father, George Fife Angas, was involved with the settlement of South Australia. George French Angas collected subscribers for *South Australia illustrated* (Angus 1847) before he left for the colony, where he arrived in 1844. Within days of his arrival he set off to the country doing drawings of the landscapes. In July he left for New Zealand to prepare *The New Zealanders illustrated* (Angus 1846) but he was back in Adelaide early in 1845. After further exploration and an exhibition of his works he left for England in July

1845 where he exhibited 300 of his Australasian paintings (Tregenza 1980).

Comparing the paintings with the present day landscapes, the Angas view of Angaston (*Angaston, evening*) shows relatively little change. In contrast, drastic clearing is evident in areas adjacent to Port Lincoln (*Port Lincoln from Winter's Hill, 1845*) and Victor Harbour (*Encounter Bay*). A current view over Adelaide down Waterfall Gully shows denser vegetation than exhibited in Angas's painting, *View from Mount Lofty*, of 1844.

Modification of field sketches for final work is evident in some of Angas's paintings. For example, in *Encampment of Native Women near Cape Jervis* in the Art Gallery of South Australia, the aborigines depicted are clothed but are naked in the field sketches (*Encounter Bay Women*, National Library of Australia). However, although landscapes were heightened for dramatic effect, his portrayal of trees and localities is generally accurate.

Eugene von Guérard

Von Guérard was born in Vienna in 1811. After travel and artistic experience in Europe he came to Australia in 1852. In 1855, then newly married, he spent a short time in South Australia. In a period of only a few weeks he visited a number of the sites already illustrated by Angas and Gill (Carroll & Tregenza 1986).

Von Guérard was an established artist and his intensely romantic landscapes were appreciated widely in Australia. His fine field sketches are less well known but these provide accurate detailed drawings of South Australian sites, most of which can be localized today. They remain an important record of landscapes which are now commonly degraded.

On 27 July 1855 von Guérard completed a return walk from Waterfall Gully in the foothills to the summit of Mt Lofty, a round trip of 6 km and involving a climb of nearly 500 metres. During the day he completed a remarkable series of detailed pencil drawings of the landscape and individual plant species. The fine detail and von Guérard's annotations have enabled all the sites to be localized and compared with the present scene. These studies, housed at the Alexander Turnbull Library, constitute an important botanical record. However, caution is required when interpreting the final painted landscapes which were completed in his studio. Von Guérard combined his field sketches into a final picture which was therefore contrived. The several elements combined in *Scenery in the Mount Lofty Ranges, near Adelaide, and a view of the Gulf of St. Vincent, South Australia* (Elders IXL Collection, Art

Gallery of South Australia) can be readily identified from the field sketches.

Early vegetation in the vicinity of Adelaide

All three of the above artists showed more park like vegetation in the vicinity of Adelaide than now occurs, e.g. *Glen Osmond Mine* (Gill 1845), *Falls of Glen Stuart* (Angas 1844, of Morialta Falls) and *First Creek, 1855* (von Guérard). This raises the question of whether the artists were in fact accurate or, whether the woodlands have since thickened. Despite visiting many of the sites used as subject matter by them it has only been possible to identify one living tree depicted in their illustrations, e.g. *Bei Tanunda Creek, 1855* (von Guérard). A few dead ones were also recognized, e.g. in *Tanunda Creek, Sud. Aust. 1855* (von Guérard). This suggests that, unless they were cut down, the turnover of trees in these localities might be more rapid than often thought.

Conclusions

Studies of the work of these artists suggest that they recorded useful botanical information at the ecological and landscape level, but less often at the species level. It is also evident that field sketches and studies provide more reliable information than final lithographs or oil paintings in which modification may have occurred.

References

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